

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
**ISSN-2321-7065**

**IJELLH**

# **International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

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### Re-reading Holocaust through Translation Literature

**Abstract:** Translation in disguise is a boon to learn the different types of lifestyles and cultural practices in the world. It enables to learn not only the bright side of life in the world; it also projects the subaltern position of people under the tyranny of some powerful nation/people. One such incident which disturbed the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the mass killing of the Jewish community. It is termed as ‘holocaust’ by the Europeans, which means religious sacrifice. The killing of the Jews was not a religious sacrifice hence the correct term to call the mass killing is genocide or slaughter. The present paper attempts to project the horror of holocaust by analysing the select poems of Nelly Sachs, a witness to holocaust.

**Key Words:** Translation, Holocaust, Jews, German.

Translation is not a simple act of conversion of one language into another: instead it enables one to read, understand and experience various culture and tradition of the world. Language for communication has evolved in the riverside and that is not meant only to convert emotion or ideas. It is embedded with its culture and environment. Thus translation does not end with simply translating the words instead it enables a foreigner to understand its cultural terms and practices. With the advancement of globalisation, the world has shrunk already. Understanding thousands of language, culture and tradition is necessary now which is easily

possible due to translation. Literature plays a major role in understanding cultures of various countries as it is considered as a mirror of a society. Hence literature in translation provides the detailed study of various societies, cultures and traditions.

The present paper aims to study the major tragic events in the human history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, holocaust. The word holocaust etymologically derived from a Greek word means 'sacrifice by fire'. Atrocities on Jews which is also termed as anti- Semitism were not new in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the use of the word anti-Semitism,

...dates only to the 1870s, there is evidence of hostility toward Jews long before the Holocaust—even as far back as the ancient world, when Roman authorities destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and forced Jews to leave Palestine ([www.history.com](http://www.history.com)).

Later under the Europeans the Jews faced discrimination. In 1933, the Nazi's who came to power in German considered themselves as superior by treating/placing the Jews in inferior position. The Germans took it for granted to ill-treat the Jews or to kill them. The ultimatum of their torture was the mass killing of the Jews by concentration camps. This killing continued till the end of World War II and by May 8, 1945 it has come to an end. From 1941 to 1945 around six million European Jews, that is two-third of the Jews, were killed. The aftermath of holocaust was more tragic as the survivors suffered with mental and psychological problems. Many Jews migrated all over the world with the hope of better life. The objective of the paper is to present painful memories of holocaust through select poems of Nelly Sachs.

Nelly Leonie Sachs (1891-1970) was a Swedish poet of German birth, who received Nobel Prize for literature in 1966. Though a Nobel Prize winner, she was less popular among the literary world. To find answer to her less popularity might be a difficult one which might lead to assumptions that belonging to a minority group, she is rejected by the world. She had a very comfortable and rich childhood. Her interest towards creative writing started at earlier

age. When the Nazi's took power and started atrocities on the Jews, Sachs got affected psychologically due to it. It has gone to an extent that she lost her ability to speak at a point. Regarding it, in a letter to her friend, she has mentioned it as,

For... days I lived under a witch's spell, speechless. My voice had taken flight, gone to swim with the fish. It had deserted the body's other members; they were left standing, in horror, turned to salt. Such was its bewilderment, all real utterance being forbidden, the power of speech abandoned me (Sachs, 1977: 311).

She got rescued from German by her Swedish friend at the last minute before being departed to the camps by the Germans. In Sweden, she translated Swedish poems and wrote poems. The report of her friends and family members about their being victim of the concentration camp reached her in 1943 which distressed her. She addressed her life as a 'battleground'.

Sachs' mother's death in 1950 affected her more. The confusions and reality of being alone, life in exile and known people's death in the concentration camp affected her which resulted in her stay in the mental hospital. As she felt that writing only could rescue her from the problems, she continued writings even in hospitals. She explained that how writing has become a life saving source for her as,

The terrible experience s which brought me personally to the brink of death and darkness became my tutors. If I had not been able to write, i would not have survived. Death was my teacher. How could I have been occupied with anything else? My metaphors are my wound (Fioretos, 2012 :99)

Her initial poems in exile illustrate the suffering, persecutions, life in exile of the Jewish community. Her poems are the representative of the Jews. Though the Jews were brutally slaughtered by the Germans, she never used her poetry to instil hatred towards the Germans. Instead she was upset about the inhumanity nature of those people in killing their own companions. Nevertheless her poems talk more about harmony and forgiveness because she

believed that there is no end to the sense of humanity. In her Nobel award speech she said, “In spite of all the horrors past, I believe you” proves her belief in forgiveness. She died in 1970.

Sachs earlier poems (before the Nazi attack) were light hearted romantic poems. After experiencing the horror of holocaust, her theme of writing has moved from simple to burdened one. All her poems are titled after the first line of her poems. Though her poems are translated in several languages, all her poems have German title. The present paper attempts to analyse three of Nelly Sachs poems which describe the horror of holocaust and its aftermath.

The first poem “If Only I Knew” gives the painful viewing/remembering of the dead Jewish people in the camp. The writer is painfully imagining what might be the last thought or sight of the dead person. She begins the poem with the indication of impossibility, “If only I knew”. She is painfully interested in knowing the dead person’s last sight. She imagines many things and lists out those as; 1. A stone that had received many last looks from the dead people. The line, “they fell in blindness on the blind?” may indicate the stone as blind, lifeless or the Germans who are blind without sympathy or falling on the already piled dead bodies. 2. The earth which has become a dirty place, with the covering of dead people shoes or with dead bodies. The Jews were made to remove their shoes before entering into the concentration camp and it had multiple meanings.

For Nazis, the shoe piles acted as a visual representation of the success of their final solution. Every pile and overstocked warehouse represented a death toll; each pair of shoes represented a captured or murdered body. Left on display in the camps, shoe piles disempowered and threatened those imprisoned within. People in the camp saw overwhelming, ever-growing piles of shoes that emphasized their mortality. Tall enough for large swaths of prisoners to see, the overbearing piles of shoes spread the threatening message through the camp ([dh.blogs.wm.edu](http://dh.blogs.wm.edu)).

3. The 'last road' in which the Jews travelled finally to reach their final destination that is to the concentration camp. 4. They might have seen a puddle which is next to their camp or looked at themselves in a piece of shining metal or the belt-buckle of the enemies or a fortune-teller from heaven who might have given promises of their life in heaven. 5. A bird sign in the air sent by the earth to indicate its love for the soul that flicked away from the burned body. The poem indicates the pain of remembering the agony of death experienced by a known person. The writer's urge to know the last sight or the thought of the person allows her to imagine all possible things around the dead person, still she could only assume. The poet raises a question to a dead person though she knows that she will never get answer for the question.

The second poem "Chorus of Orphans" is a very famous and well read poem of Nelly Sachs which also talks about the horror of holocaust. Each stanza of the poem begins with the line "We orphans/ We lament the world". The 'we' denotes the Jewish community who are made as orphans by the power. Now they lament the world. She uses metaphors in her poems to present the helpless conditions of the Jews. She begins the poem by narrating the agony undergone by the Jews. She denotes the concentration camp and the burning of Jews with trees. They are cut down like branches of trees and thrown in fire. As the protectors/parents were used as firewood by the Germans, the remaining Jews/children experience loneliness in the earth. The losing of parents is described as parents playing hide and seek in dark with children. The dead parents monitor their children from the darkness when the children look at God. The children's toys became stones which have the faces of father, mother. The flower toy does not wither like a natural one, the toys do not bite like the real animals, and they do not burn like dry wood. She finishes the poem with a question to the world. She questions, "world why have you taken our tender mothers/and our fathers" and she continues that they resembled their parents but the parents are no more. Hence they "no longer resemble anyone in the world". Sachs concludes the poem by accusing the world for being silent witness of the horrible

massive killing of humans. This poem leaves the readers with pain and guilt for belonging to family of quite observers.

The third poem “Angel of Suppliants” talks about the transformation the Jewish community experiences after the tragic incident. The killing of the Jews in the concentration camp (especially in fire) resembled the red sky during the sunset. The fire has taken those people into night that is death. Not only people but even the things which are part of a home/family like ‘utensils’, ‘cradles’ got burnt in fire and the ashes are flying in the air.

At present in the death’s white floor plants are grown and those plants are not a natural one whereas they are planted in ‘despair’. The plants are grown with human body parts. It indicates the cruel death of the Jews under the Nazi German. The forest will not rustle as it has drenched with the tears of loved ones. The mothers are tearing their roots in order to survive which may indicate their urge to live for their children’s sake. Transformation undergone/undergoing by the Jews are indicated by “...forming something new out of the Night/since they are still warm from transformation”. Here night might indicate the agony (death) faced by the Jews. The next generation who are still warm from the fire are transforming from their innocence to experience. The children are playing in the sand and Sachs wants that sand to be blessed hence it can understand the longing of the children. She tries to project that the next generation does not want to take revenge upon the killers instead they want to create something new. This poem ends with the transformation of the Jews and their hope for the future.

Reading of Sachs poems leave the rest of the world with sense of guilt. The pain undergone by the Jewish community and the brutal treatment they underwent did not reach the knowledge of many people/many countries even Poland who allied with German in the World War II was ignorant about it. Some people merely knew about Hitler’s atrocities on the Jews but not in detail. Tracking of works in translation by holocaust victims like Nelly Sachs, Anne Frank, Hannah Szenes works may enable the future generation to gain knowledge about the

brutal behaviours of humans. It may guide to understand the pain of oppression and lead humans to live in harmony.



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